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ABSTRACT

In an attempt to set up a heuristic model for the study of attitude formation and change, this paper takes into consideration man's cognitive-environmental interfaces and man's capacity to process information. By conceptualizing attitude, the authors anticipate that they will be able to offer a potential for solving attitude-behavior conflict. (DS)

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Attitude As An Information Processing Construct

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The task of delineating "crucial issues" in the study of attitude formation and change has long occupied the time and concern of individuals concerned with human psychology and, more recently, with human communication phenomena. Recently, Kiesler, Collins and Miller (1969), after such an issue-consideration, argued that "It would appear that most of these issues are theoretical and empirical issues. They should be resolved by data rather than philosophical argument." To be sure, this paper is not intended to offer another "philosophical argument." Instead, our purpose is to describe a theoretic framework for the study of attitude formation and change. Additionally, we intend to explicate specific research directions which such a perspective may suggest. Essentially, this paper represents some preliminary thinking on the issue of developing a heuristic model of attitude formation and change. Our thinking is predicated on the notion that the attitude construct is inextricably bound up with both man's rational or processing capabilities and behaviors, and man's social or environmental behaviors.

The learning theory notions of attitude (e.g., Greenwald, Brock, and Ostrom, 1968) serve as useful referents for rational or information-processing components of attitude. Similarly, the functional theory notions (e.g., Katz, 1960; and Kelman, 1961) seem to suggest the importance of environment or societal-bound determinants of attitude. Another useful correlate is provided by Miller (1969) in his discussion of Information I and II. In such a scheme man's cognitive or rational capacities would be related to his Information II processes and his environmental capacities to Information I factors.

Consequently, this paper will address itself to two central issues; some considerations of cognitive-environmental interfaces and consideration of man's capacities to process information.

Finally, by way of caveat, this paper will not seek to resolve the seeming disparities existing in various definitions of attitude. It is folly at best to attempt such a task. There has not been, nor is there any reason to think there should be, one conceptualization which is acceptable to all those interested in researching the attitude construct.

Greenwald (1968) has classified popular treatments of attitude into several types: 1) definitions presented by writers as their own which is acknowledged as different from others (e.g., Doob, 1947); 2) the selection of a "favorite" or "new" definition (e.g., Insko, 1967; Allport, 1935); 3) those writers who "despair" at the differences of attitude definitions (e.g., McGuire, 1968) and, 4) his own approach (Greenwald, 1968) which can be termed a "translation/convergence" approach. For all these "types" and classifications, however, little is directly concerned with the relationship between the attitude per se and the amounts and kinds of information which is processed. Instead, the emphasis appears to be on the specification of attitudinal components with the conclusion generally drawn that the attitude is an evaluative predisposition to respond.

The conceptual assumption undergirding this paper is a definition of attitude in terms of its systemic properties which function as a correlate of behavior. It seems useful, therefore, to utilize the systems notions of attitude developed by Schroder, Driver, and Streufert (1967) as a basic point of departure. Essentially, we agree with Schroder et al. that a description of the attitude construct must be based " . . . upon how a person thinks or uses an attitude as a structure for processing new information, as opposed to an emphasis upon content, upon what a person thinks, what his attitudes are, and so forth" (p. 5).

Simply stated, such a notion calls for a consideration of attitude as more than an evaluative predisposition. Instead, the attitude can be conceived of in a systemic manner such that its evaluative state is perceived of as part of the perceptual process which describes the organism's behavior (see, for example, Sereno and Bodaken, 1973). The consideration of attitude as one component of the human behavioral system thus necessitates a concern more for the relationships between states of the system than for a mere isolation of attitude-behavior discrep-

ancy issues.

This conceptualization recognizes two finite and dynamic homeostatic dimensions of man which mutually impinge upon his behavioral latitudes and which are interfaced with the "black box" notion of attitude. The first dimension recognizes man as a complex rational animal with varying capacities to attend to, store, and process information. In this regard we find the systemic learning theory notions of content and structure (Schroder, et al., 1967) to be useful for describing the primary components of the rational man's adaptational behaviors. The second dimension recognizes man as a complex social animal with varying capacities to behave within his environment. Thus, the concepts of reference groups and life styles (e.g., Shibutani, 1965; Toffler, 1970) are relevant. Similarly, the notion of "perceived behavioral consequence" is useful for describing the social man's adaptational behaviors. Both dimensions of man are perceived to be functionally related in a nonmonotonic fashion. The hallucinatory and avoidance behaviors observed in information deprivation and glut studies (e.g., Levi, 1967; Selye, 1956) define the consequences of too little or too much rational stimulation; the notion of future shock defines the consequence of too much social stimulation (e.g., Toffler, 1970).

Thus, attitude can be conceptualized an an adaptational tool of the rational-social man which functions to maintain both the information processing and behavioral dimensions of individuals' within an optimum range of environmental stimulation--within a golden mean range of adaptational stress. As with any process or system notion of man, it is dysfunctional to separate the two attitudinal dimensions into orthogonal properties. Rather, it seems useful to assume that the perceived behavioral consequences inherent in any stimulus serve as partial determinants of the level of information processing activity in which an individual will engage. While at the same time, the information processing capacities of an individual may determine the rational-social stress potential or the perceived behavioral consequences inherent in the stimulus.

In order to clarify this concept is is necessary first to modify the notion of adaptive orientations (Schroder, et al., 1967) in order to encompass the homeostatic functions postulated from both the rational and social dimensions of man. Therefore, it seems that not only are the content (a set of filters which select certain kinds of information from the environment) and structure (a set of rules which combines these items of information in specific ways) variables important, it is also useful to include a capacity variable. In other words, it is necessary to account for the finite capacities of individual's to make adaptive orientations to their environments.

We reason that man's rational-social capacities to make adaptive orientations to his environment is in large part determined by the complexity of that environment. Each individual has a finite capacity to order and respond to environmental stimuli and has various coping tools at his disposal which allow him to maintain his environmental stimulation within those tolerance limits. Indeed, this allows him to avoid the consequences of information deprivation or glut. In other words, an individual who experiences a highly complex environment may find it useful to adopt rigid content postures by utilizing simplistic structural or "low integration indexes" to derive those content positions. Such behaviors serve to minimize the perceived behavioral consequences of a stimuli and therefore simplify the adaptive process elicited by any given stimuli in that environment. Thus, to the extent that the behavioral consequences of any given stimuli can be perceived as minimal then simplistic adaptive orientation behaviors would be functional for maintaining the individual within a tolerable range of cognitive stimulation.

Environmental complexity is assumed here to be a function of the number and power of environmental events experienced by an individual. For example, getting a traffic ticket would be a relatively powerful environmental event for an individual. It would have high relative potential to tax his cognitive capacities. He would need to process that event in a "high integration index" which would allow him to make complex adaptive orientations. He would have to recognize and cope with many complex and interrelated rational-social behavioral consequences such as: 1) increased insurance rates, 2) a need to borrow money, 3) post-

poning his planned vacation, 4) a disappointed and frustrated wife, 5) feelings toward his own driving habits, 6) feelings toward police.

The behavioral consequence of the traffic ticket is high and the need to make adaptive orientations to the individual's rational-social universe is great. As a consequence, his finite cognitive capacity may be quite near the optimal adjustment level. If he is given a message at this time dealing with President Nixon's economic policies he would probably find it functionally useful to discount the behavioral consequences inherent in the message and allow himself to process that message in a simplistic way. In other words, he may find it more useful to rehearse or role-play the rational-social behavioral consequences implicit in the event of the traffic ticket than he would to rehearse or role-play the consequences of Nixon's policies. Consequently, since he apparently has a finite capacity to process information it is reasonable that the more immediate or "realistic" consequence of the traffic ticket would demand adaptive orientation priority. Or put another way, the anticipation of the new rational-social environment which must be evolved as a consequence of the ticket is more crucial to his maintenance of rational-social stability than is the anticipation of possible environments which might accrue as a consequence of Nixon's behaviors.

Therefore, it may be useful to call up a rigid content position that would filter out all of the specific content of the Nixon message into simplistic binary catagories so the person could utilize a low integration index to process the information and therefore conclude that "The crazy bum is going to ruin our country and I'd better get a good job before he finishes the task." Furthermore, as a social animal, he would prefer to keep his social universe in a fairly stable state and would probably express his position on the message as to minimize the behavioral consequence of his behavior. In other words, it makes little sense to evoke the rational "attitude" which leads to information processing with a low integration index without evoking a corresponding social "attitude" which deminishes the probability of generating stressful behavioral consequences or disharmonies between oneself and ones desired relationships to valued others. Therefore, in a group of pro-Nixon people he would mouth neutral pro-Nixon noises and in a group of anti-Nixon people he would mouth anti-Nixon generalities. If he were uncertain about the position of the group he was in he might merely assert that it is a complex issue.

At another time (when he is driving better) when his capacity to deal with stimuli is sufficiently below its optimum level, or when he has essentially managed to stabalize his rational-social environment, the individual might very well engage in considerably more complex rational-social behaviors (i.e., utilize a more complex attitude to determine his behaviors). He might find it useful to perceive greater behavioral consequences in the message and useful therefore to process the message with a high-integration index and express the content of his "attitude" in a clear and concrete way regardless of the social context. Even in this case, however, he would assess the behavioral consequences of his overt behavior within the social situation and would obviously avoid a behavior which could cause him excessive social-rational stress. In sum, he would not risk losing his affiliation with a valued reference group or life style by suddenly assuming postures discrepant with those fundamental to the group.

This point is crucial. As Shibutani (1955) notes:

> A reference group, then, is that group whose outlook is used by the actor as the frame of reference in the organization of his perceptual field.
>
> Reference groups, then, arise through the internalization of norms; they constitute the structure of expectations imputed to some audience for whom one organizes his conduct. (pp. 77, 78)

Stated another way, man seems to find it useful to internalize several conceptual anchors or judgmental referents around which his rational-social universe is ordered (for a development of judgmental theory see Sherif and Hovland, 1961). The power and environmental utility of those anchors is a function of 1) the amount

of rational-social reality such anchors serve to stabilize for the individual, and 2) the specificity and stability or adjustment potential of the groups' rational-content and social-behavior norms as functional properties of the individuals' homeostatic maintanance system which keeps his rational-social universe within an optimum range of stimulation.

Reference groups which order large portions of man's rational-social universe and provide clear attitude-behavioral frameworks within which he can perform seem to manifest powerful central concepts (e.g., John Birchers--Communism; Religious group--godliness) which function as powerful content filters, these reduce large classes of relevant stimuli to discernable binary components suitable for simplistic low integration structuring. Reference groups, on the other hand, which order relatively small portions of our universe (university professor; student) or which have generalized or vague behavioral guidelines determining affiliation (Playboy; Republican) seem to have less powerful central concepts and therefore less potential for evoking perceptions of great behavioral consequence when any single stimuli relevant to that group is confronted by the individual.

Perhaps a useful way to expand this notion is to develop a reconceptualization of a specific attitudinal study. For example, the inn keepers in the well-known LaPiere (1934) study were assumed to have demonstrated an "attitude-behavior discrepancy" because their rational predispositions to exclude orientals from their establishments did not correspond to their social behaviors when the actual situation occurred. Viewed from our perspective the inn keepers do not demonstrate inconsistency; quite the opposite--they demonstrate a highly predictable consistency.

At one point in time they were presented with an abstract stimulus by a vague social source. The stimulus required a response which had virtually no behavioral consequence to the individual therefore allowing them to derive their attitude from essentially rational components. Moreover, the behavioral consequences of their behavior (questionnaire response) was inconsequential. Thus, it was reasonable for these individuals to utilize a rigid content notion of "orientals" to facilitate the evaluation of the stimulus in a low integration type information-processing structure. Consequently, the brief role-playing which was called for in response to the "If orientals came . . ." type stimulus was answered with a negative response.

At a later point in time the same inn keepers were presented with a concrete stimulus with rather powerful behavioral consequences for these individuals. Assuming they recognized the couple as orientals, it would follow that the perceived behavioral consequences (e.g., legal trouble, a nasty scene, financial loss) of excluding them called for a rather complex integration structure and an open content notion suitable for determining the attitude that governed the behavior demonstrated.

However, assume one of the inn keepers had been a Lester Maddox type individual with a strong association to a well-structured group with the powerful central concept of "no orientals." In such a case the behavioral consequences of violating the expected behaviors of the valued group would certainly make the loss of income, legal threat, or risk of a scene inconsequential.

The heuristic merits of this conceptualization of the attitude construct lies primarily in the possibility of such a notion to 1) offer potential for resolving the attitude-behavior discrepancy conflict; 2) incorporate a system or process notion of man into attitude change research, and 3) develop a framework from which topics of major cultural and individual relevance can be explored. Furthermore, a major variable impinging upon man's communication behavior is suggested--the variable of cognitive capacity. This variable is amenable to operationalization through utilization of the Holmes and Rahe (1967) "Social Readjustment Rating Scale" or the Crawford and Reinard "Environmental Stability Scale (1973) which assigns numerical weights to the impact of various life events.

Research is currently underway testing some of the notions discussed in this paper. Specifically, we are seeking to assess correlations between life changes and perceived persuasibility (Crawford and Reinard, 1973). Presumably, the find-

ings of this research will give us some indication of the validity of the rational-social attitude thesis. Additionally, we are in the early stages of an investigation into interpersonal communication networks among the urban poor. Crucial to our description of the nature of these networks are factors related to individual-cultural interaction relevant to post-change decision-making. Finally, we are investigating the attitudinal components and behavioral correlates relevant to linguistic stereotyping. This research (Frentz, Bodaken, and Sereno, 1973) is designed to assist us in the development of viable teacher intervention programs for schools located in primarily nonstandard-speaking school systems. (Preliminary reports of these research projects can be acquired by corresponding with either of the authors.) For now, we are refining the conceptual linkages discussed in this paper.

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